

# **KENTUCKY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

## **STAFF NOTE**

### **Review Item:**

Dropout Prevention and Persistence to Graduation

### **Applicable Statute or Regulation:**

KRS 158.145, KRS 158.146, 704 KAR 3:305

### **History/Background:**

**Existing Policy.** At the December meeting, the Kentucky Board of Education began review of the item, Dropout Prevention and Persistence to Graduation. The Board reviewed information that had been requested regarding the dropout rate among African Americans, Hispanics, and students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency and the homeless. In December, the Department proposed that the Board consider the dropout problem over the course of multiple meetings because it is such a complex issue directly related to a broader context of the changes that are needed in Kentucky to bring every student to graduation and successful transition to college and work.

As summarized by the American Youth Policy Forum<sup>i</sup>, research tells us that:

- The dropout problem is extreme.
- Members of some groups are at much greater risk than others.
- Individual dropouts and their communities face many negative consequences.

The December meeting focused on the extent and nature of the problem. As requested by the Board, the February discussion will focus on more in-depth examination of national research and strategies in place at the local levels. Selected districts will present information about how they are approaching schools where higher rates of dropout persist in terms of success, challenges, and opportunities. The Department will present an initial set of recommendations.

### **National Research**

In November 2006, Jobs for the Future<sup>ii</sup> and the Center for American Progress<sup>iii</sup> published *Addressing America's Dropout Challenge: State Efforts to Boost Graduation Rates Require Federal Support*. The purpose of the report is to advocate for the passage of the federal Graduation Promise Act, which the authors say will: 1) hold schools and districts accountable for meeting graduation rate targets while providing sufficient flexibility to meet these targets, 2) identify and intervene in the districts and high schools losing the most students, and 3) through competitive grants, develop and disseminate best practices to educate students who are not on track to graduate. Because the best practices referenced in the report are based on research contributed from the Education Trust, Achieve, Inc, MDRC, Inc., the Alliance for Excellent Education, the National Center for Education and the Economy and others, the

evidence-based strategies are worth examination at the state level. In addition to these sources, the Department relied upon the National Education Association's *Action Plan to Address the School Dropout Crisis*.

#### On Track Indicators, Early Warning Systems and Early Interventions

As discussed in the December staff note, recent studies in large, urban districts with high dropout rates reveal that it is possible to identify students unlikely to graduate. The University of Chicago research showed “an on-track indicator that signals when 9<sup>th</sup> graders are falling seriously off the track to earning a diploma is 85 percent predictive of future dropouts.”<sup>iv</sup> The New York City Department of Education found that only twenty percent of “overage and under-credited students in the large comprehensive high schools ultimately receive any kind of diploma.”<sup>v</sup> The authors argue that dropout is not a singular event based on a decision instigated by circumstances beyond the school's control. Instead, the authors conclude that dropouts follow “identifiable patterns of performance and behavior – patterns that schools districts and states can analyze and address.”

While researchers agree that early warning systems are necessary, they are not sufficient. They must be paired with both proactive and responsive practices and systemic strategies that have proven to be effective in improving outcomes for students.

#### Systemic Approach to Early Effective Interventions and Individualized Instruction

If evidence from the early warning indicator research points to academic failure around the middle to high school transition and the 9<sup>th</sup> grade as the strongest indicator of getting off track and staying off track, what interventions are proving effective? Authors of the JFF study note that certain strategies result in “significantly more students passing gateway academic courses such as algebra and in higher promotion rates from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, both of which are highly predictive” of graduation. These strategies are:

- Intensive focus on literacy and numeracy in the early months of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade;
- Extending learning time and opportunity as part of acceleration strategies;
- Rapid response to academic failure, especially before the reporting of first-semester grades.

In addition to strategies that place intense focus on the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and readiness for high school work, the JFF identifies innovative schooling models for students who need substantially different approaches as high-promise strategies. The best examples of these small, highly personalized school models graduate “two to three times more of their off-track students than the comprehensive schools from which the students came.”

#### Alternative Pathways

Strategies to support the creation of new models for earning credits and recovering credits for in-school youth should expand to address the needs of those who have already dropped out or who stayed in school and received a diploma but lack the skills needed to secure a job sufficient to keep a family out of poverty. For this reason, dropout prevention and recovery programs for in-school youth should be paired with comprehensive programs that connect older, undereducated youth with a range of options. According to the National Youth Employment Coalition, “Some of the most promising and innovative practices are taking

place in our nation's community-based and alternative education schools and programs serving youth between the ages of 16 and 24. . . Yet, while these learning options are providing opportunities to help increase the chances that no young person is left behind, they have also been overlooked, under-resourced, and marginalized. The need for educational pathways leading to a credential is immense; yet the capacity to serve disconnected youth is inadequate.”<sup>vi</sup> In a redesigned system of secondary education, there should be a range of options, or alternative pathways, available –options that support at-risk and underserved youth with individualized learning in a culture of high expectations that lead to a meaningful credential.

As the Board considers strategies for increasing graduation rates, it is almost impossible to separate the discussion from a discussion of what good instruction looks like and how to make it available every day for every student. Strategies must focus on instruction and results and not just structure and process.

Based on national research and previous Board discussion, the Department is proposing five comprehensive strategies for increasing persistence to successful graduation (Appendix A). Also attached are:

- An overview of a three-year public messaging campaign to reduce dropouts and increase graduation rates that will soon be implemented in Kentucky (Appendix B).
- An overview of a grant-funded pilot in which seven districts will collaborate with one another and with the Kentucky Virtual High School to find new ways to support achievement in mathematics, thus reducing the risk of failure and later dropout. (Appendix C)
- A chart depicting the stages of a student's progress from one level of education to another (Appendix D). At key transition points, students should be assessed for readiness to learn at the next level and provided with interventions and supports as needed. If the purpose of a high school education is to prepare a student for successful transition to the next level of learning and work, then every student should be engaged in credit-based transition courses before he/she exits. The nature of those transitional studies will vary depending upon the student's ILP.

#### Local Districts to Address Board

At the meeting, the Board will also hear testimony from districts about challenges and opportunities in supporting all students to graduation.

#### **Policy Issues:**

- What input does the Board have on Attachment A, Strategies to Increase Persistence to Successful Graduation?
- Does the Board wish to begin promulgation of regulatory changes to implement any of these strategies?

### **Impact on Getting to Proficiency:**

If it is true that a student's right to public education in Kentucky is limited to the district in which he/she resides, it is appropriate to hold districts and schools more accountable for engaging in proactive practice, using deliberate systems of individualized supports, and for exploiting state and local partnerships to provide a portfolio of options for achieving graduation.

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**Deputy Commissioner**

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**Interim Commissioner of Education**

### **Date:**

February 2007

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<sup>i</sup> American Youth Policy Forum, *Every Nine Seconds in America a Student Becomes a Dropout*, 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> Jobs for the Future is a national non-profit research, consulting, and advocacy organization supporting quality high school and postsecondary education for all ([www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)).

<sup>iii</sup> The Center for American Progress is a think-tank dedicated to improving the lives of Americans through ideas and action ([www.americanprogress.org](http://www.americanprogress.org)). CAP has a strong strand on education.

<sup>iv</sup> Allensworth, Elaine and John Q. Easton. *The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation*. June 2005.

<sup>v</sup> Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, as presented to New York Board of Regents. June 2006.

<sup>vi</sup> Thakur, Mala and Kristen Henry, *Financing Alternative Education Pathways: Profiles and Policy*, National Youth Employment Coalition, 2005.